'I'm here for the songs'

From working on a space shuttle to making a Hindi masala movie, Nilu Niranjana Gavankar is in it for the heck of it, says **Kamini Mathai**

A 55-year-old Indian engineer — now onto her 54th address, her sixth country, with a degree in Microbiology and Chemistry, who was once the first Indian woman engineer to work at the NASA's Space Shuttle Launch Complex at Vandemberg Space Station (or so the FBI told her), who has written books in Marathi and can play the conga drums — decides to come to Bollywood to make a masala movie and teams up with Samrat Mukherjee for a screenplay and the late Kishore Kumar's wife actress Leena Chandravarkar for lyrics.

Nilu Gavankar (left, with R D Burman) decided a musical was *the* way to remember Panchamda. Now *Aankhon Mein Sapne Liye*, starring Cleo Issacs (right) is a reality

Now what are the chances of that happening?

Depends really.

Add a catalyst — Pete, our Indian engineer Nilu Niranjana Gavankar's elder brother. Now make him friends with Rono Mukherjee and Rahul Dev Burman. Rono Mukherjee's uncle is Kishore Kumar, which gives us the Leena Chandravarkar connection. Rono Mukherjee's son is Samrat and now suddenly everything seems to fall into place.

Except for why.

It's difficult to see a connection between building refineries and power plants and a Hindi movie called *Aankhon Mein Sapne Liye* however far you're willing to stretch your imagination. Before you pull a muscle: R D Burman, he's the link.

Gavankar was in China in 1994 when she heard Burman had passed away. Upset, she brooded over what she could dedicate to his memory and, four years later, came up with the idea of a musical. "I wanted to make something for Panchamda (Burman for the uninitiated). I just woke up one day and said, 'Why not, let's just make a musical'. I created my movie for the songs, not the other way around. So, if you take the songs out of the movie, it just won't flow. I haven't shot random song-and-dance sequences all over the world and glued them to the movie. The entire movie revolves around the songs," says Gavankar.

Which is where Leena Chandravarkar steps in. "I've been writing lyrics since 1990 just as a hobby," she says. Her credentials include the songs she has written for her step son Amit Kumar's album and the two numbers for *Aankhon...* — *Naam Mera Maria*, sung by Asha Bhonsle and *Ajooba* — that's she's really excited about.

Come September 2002 and the movie, starring model Cleo Issacs and Samrat Mukherjee, will be released across the country. "It's just *masala*. I decided it had to be technically perfect, with great stunts. It's a lost and found story of a young man's struggle to take care of an orphanage. I had a lot of fun directing it," says Gavankar, who is also financing the movie herself.

You tell her that's what every third person in Mumbai dreams of — directing a movie. "But this is not my dream. I'm just here for the songs. The movie's just for the heck of it. Once this is done, I'll move on."

But there's nothing in the pipeline yet. Just another pincode.